CENTRAL CITY HOUSING VENTURES
GROUND BREAKING CEREMONY
Chicago, Illinois

JUNE 11, 1996

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HOMILY

The great American Theologian Reinhold Niebuhr wrote:

> "Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in a lifetime: therefore we must be saved by hope. Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history: therefore we must be saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous can be accomplished alone: therefore we are saved by love."

Niebuhr wrote that in 1951 -- so it couldn't have been written with Central City Housing Ventures (CCHV) in mind -- but I have thought about it a lot, particularly the first proposed thought: "nothing worth doing is achieved in a lifetime, therefore we are saved by hope." Because, frankly, there were moments over the past several years that I doubted if any of us would live long enough to see this project underway in our lifetime.

But here it is, praise God. And my heart is full of gratitude -- to Jacki Miranda and the members of the CCHV Board -- to our friends at the Chicago Christian Industrial League -- and to the people of the Second Presbyterian Church, and to those who have patiently worked with this project and for the churches who have sat through endless meetings -- and to my clergy colleagues, particularly Gene Winkler and Bob McLaughlin, with whom I have been privileged to share the dream of an ecumenical witness in Chicago, an actual hands-on, bricks and mortar construction for the welfare of our community, and to Mayor Daley and the City of Chicago for standing with us in this endeavor.

The words of Niebuhr have been on my mind as well because they remind me of a truth we sometimes forget: that is, we are a community: "Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone, therefore we are saved by love." We are in this together: we share, as people of faith, with all the people of the

community, the joys, privileges, responsibilities and tragedies of our common life.

It is a great city -- the best city in the world. But our faith tradition mandates a special responsibility: to be the conscience of the community: to see what the community would prefer not to see, and to name what the community would ignore, and to stand with the outsiders, the marginalized, the ones who fall through the cracks -- who live well below the safety net: the very ones who suffer first and most every time the body politic decides to economize.

It is not always a popular responsibility. But it is an honorable one and a faithful one -- and sometimes -- this moment being one of them -- it is an effective one.

The faith tradition is clear --

"When the poor and needy seek water and there is none... I, the God of Israel will not forsake them," Isaiah wrote.

And

"therefore says the Lord God, see, I am laying a foundation stone, a precious cornerstone, a new foundation andwill make justice the line and righteousness the plummit."

And

"I was hungry and you gave me food,
I was thirsty and you gave me to drink,
I was a stranger and you made me welcome,
I was naked and you gave me clothing,
I was sick and you cared for me,
I was in prison and you visited me."

And he surely would have added "I was homeless and you gave me shelter."

The best and highest and holiest of our faith tradition is the assumption of responsibility for the life of the human community, the standing in solidarity with the poor, the encouragement of the weak ...

One of the prophets of our age, the late Lewis Thomas, a genetic biologist, a physician, head of Sloan Kettering, said,

"A society can be judged by the way it deals with its weakest and most vulnerable numbers."

In a day when it has become politically correct and even fashionable to blame the most vulnerable for their vulnerability, and the weakest for their weakness, thank God, for a community of faith with courage and tenacity to speak the truth, God's truth.

And the determination and grace to do -- in the name of God -- what must be done to encourage and stand with those in need.

And the patience to stay with it over the years.

The promise of this project is precisely that it shelters, enables and empowers men and women, and, in a modest but important way, levels the playing field, providing a base -- a home -- from which the rest of life can be built.

The promise and beauty of this project is that hope.

"Thank you" to all who have made it possible and will see it through to completion.

Thanks be to God.